

# RIGHTFUL FAIRY TALES

NOW WITH 3 NEW TALES!!



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY  
JANE DARY



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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Lila,  
who read me fairy tales every night of my childhood.  
Also to my father, Mike Stanger—  
poet, musician, and artist extraordinaire.*

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## ***PERSIMMION***

Once there was a miller by trade who was actually an evil wicked witch. She lived in a semi-translucent, crystallized sugar-shell, syrup sap shack, near a babbling brook and a waterfall. Her mill wheel churned the water and rhythmically whined and shrieked, for the power that drove it came not from the water but from the souls of slaughtered children.

This evil witch was named Matilda--Millie for short, which she thought was clever, being a miller and all. If you ever saw her, you would think she looked like a hideously beautiful man. Her hair, teeth, and fingernails were long and ended in points. Her skin was as white as ivory, but it glowed underneath and luminesced in the darkness like a lily by the light of the crescent moon. Like the moon, it was marred with craters and scars, for her diet (as you will later see) was very poor. She took little regard in the living (except as specimens for her scientific experiments), and because she had always been old herself, she particularly hated the frivolity of youth.

Millie was an alchemist and genetics engineer, finding sources of never-ending amusement in combining two non-complementary gene pools. For instance, she once combined the genes of a tick with those of a goat, producing a horrible thing that could jump from several miles away to suck its chosen victim's blood. Seeing the Goattick in action, Millie laughed so hard she turned blue and fainted, landing on a rock and suffering a severe (and well-deserved) concussion in the process.

Although Millie enjoyed creating freaks of nature that defied God, her favorite activity was murdering children. She lured them to her shack with the sound of the old mill's paddle wheel, which made curious keening noises, almost like a dirge. Anyone who had things on their mind--taxes and laundry, money and love--could not hear the sound. Only those with a clear conscience and an innocent mind and soul could hear it. Thus only children responded to the wheel's call and were lured to Millie's house and their doom.

The witch welcomed the children warmly, fed them pancakes and syrup poisoned with deadly nightshade, which she grew in her atrium along with

Venus flytraps, poison ivy, and wormwood. Once the children were weakened by the drug, she bound their hands and feet and hung them from the kitchen ceiling, where they flapped like screeching fish while she slit their throats and licked the blood from their cheeks and chins. She then used the mill to grind their bones to a fine powder and disposed of the evidence.





Eventually, the witch decided she wanted a child of her own, someone to do the housework and errands, someone who could not escape, someone bound to her by blood. Her own womb was infertile, so she dragged the

prettiest, most recently diseased six-year-old girl to her genetics lab. There she removed the child's ovaries and placed them in a beaker with a tablespoon of quicksilver, a dash of sugar, and a sprinkle of cinnamon (if she was making a boy, she would have used a puppy dog's tail). The witch heated this mixture until it simmered nicely. In no time she had created a daughter of her own. The infant had delicate, pale skin with the texture of a tulip stem. Her eyes and her hair were bright yellow, mimicking the young girl Millie had murdered to create her. Millie named her Persimmion.

Persimmion hated her mother and had a strong aversion to eating meat. As a child, the sight of the constantly murdered children hanging from the kitchen ceiling and her mother's fondness for blood warped and disgusted her. All Persimmion wanted was air, warmth, water, and sunlight-simple things other people seemed to obtain so easily and in such abundance, things she couldn't have or if she could have one, she couldn't have the other. It was a constant source of frustration and fury to poor Persimmion.



For these reasons, and many others of her own, Persimmion spent her childhood trying to escape from the mill and from Millie. First, as a young child of six, then at nine, and then at eleven. She dreamt a loving mother and

father waited somewhere for her, out there, just beyond her reach, out of the woods, with a beautiful house, peach trees growing in the yard, and a puppy to pet, not a bloodsucking, jumping Goattick. In later years Persimmion ran away hoping to find a true love, her husband, whose sweet character and body were stronger than her mother's evil and would protect and care for her.

Millie hated these constant excursions, of course. Her love for Persimmion was of the selfish kind--and she could not stand disobedience. So whenever the girl disappeared, the witch stamped the floorboards three times and chanted:

*Come on home.  
Do not roam.  
Going away  
Means hell to pay.*

Immediately, Persimmion's feet turned around and walked the poor girl back home against her will.

Poor Persimmion! Her only sunlight was an anemic trickle of rays through a tight weave of branches. Her only companions were the ghosts of Millie's innocent victims, who lingered around the area, continually crying and complaining, driving Persimmion mad with their constant juvenile dirge-like tirade.



And there Persimmion stood and watched intently years later as Millie finally met her demise. The neighboring village had grown almost to the edge of the forest by then, and lumberjacks were forced to explore deeper in the woods. Soon Millie's mill was discovered and her grisly secrets revealed. One night the entire village stormed the mill, catching the witch in her sleep before she could utter a spell or escape. They burned the shack and mill wheel to the ground, as well as many trees, forming a clearing in the woods. They tried to move Persimmion's statue, but it was firmly rooted in the earth, as if anchored to the center of the world. So the villagers decided to use the statue as a memorial for all the slaughtered children. Into the folds of her clothing they carved the names of their missing offspring, whose ghosts could now rest in peace. Placated, the crowd returned to the village. The woods were now known as an evil place, forbidden to all except on the anniversary of the witch's death, when the villagers came to Persimmion's statue, crowned her with wreaths of flowers, and prayed for the souls of their lost children. So it was that Persimmion was left alone for most of the year.

Generations passed and no one came to mourn the dead children any longer. The only visitors Persimmion received were young lovers who needed a place to meet in private where their parents would never seek them. She

watched them kiss in the natural bowers, framed by trees while proclaiming their love.



They approached the statue with curiosity and touched her cold limbs. This was the first touch from a human being that Persimmion had ever had. If her heart had not been made of stone, it would have broken from longing. The lovers marveled at her sad expression and at the mysterious water that trailed down the long, dark stains under her eyes. Some wondered at the names carved into her, and carved their own names enclosed by hearts into the stone.



A century passed and Persimmion's stood alone in the forest, gathering so much moss and lichen on her cold form that she was indiscernible from her surroundings. Her eyes wept ceaselessly. Through them, she watched animals return to the once-haunted place. She observed as small trout and watercress flowed in the stream that ran past her, as dragonflies and other insects buzzed around her. She marveled at all the beauty she had missed while she was alive.

The villagers had by now forgotten the legends surrounding the woods. Hunters frequented the forest searching for pheasant and other game. A careless young hunter, aiming at a stag, unknowingly shot off the first two fingers of Persimmion's left hand.

Soon after that Persimmion saw this same young hunter bring his new wife to the clearing for a romantic stroll. The woman looked at the stream's crystalline water and commented that it was the perfect place for the mill they wanted to build as their new home. Within a week the couple returned to begin building a new house for the family they hoped to raise there. Persimmion watched as they sadly buried one little coffin after the other, which she assumed were stillborn babies. She was happy to see their young daughter grow to the age of four but was almost as distraught as they as she helplessly watched the girl drown in the stream.

Years passed and the millers became prosperous. They finally bore a son, whom Persimmion observed through the thicket that had grown around her. As he played she heard his parents call him Gabriel. She loved him from the first moment she saw him, and she decided then and there that she would be his guardian angel. Once, at the age of five, Gabriel climbed an old tree above the brambles in which Persimmion hid. When the branch snapped, the thick undergrowth surrounding the statue broke Gabriel's fall. As he got up, his young eyes caught hers, still weeping, but now with joy. Curious, Gabriel pulled a bit of moss away to reveal Persimmion's beautiful face. He was instantly entranced. Just then his mother called him in for dinner, and he ran back to the house with a secret smile.

Gabriel frequented Persimmion's thicket often as he grew. It became his hideaway. Over the years he completely cleared the statue of debris and polished it until it shone. Despite his scrubbing, he could never rid the statue's eyes of the black stain left by the centuries of water that had run from them, water that still flowed as he worked. Gabriel wondered at Persimmion's mysterious beauty, the sunlight caressing her cheek and breasts, and her eternal stone expression of compassion and sadness. If he stared at her long enough, her face and form wavered and seemed to have a life of its own. He always wondered how the statue came to be there and whose names had been carved into her. He had a suspicion she wasn't a stone wrought in the shape of a woman by human hands; it seemed she had been born somehow. She seemed like an angel.







When Gabriel became a young man, he helped his father with his work and he planned to get married himself eventually and take over the mill. At night he tossed in his bed, his dreams plagued with visions of a beautiful,

seductive woman at the end of a long hallway, her flowing golden hair shrouding her face like a veil. When Gabriel approached the dream figure, she pulled back her pale locks to reveal the cold face of the statue with its black trail of tears. In other dreams, she appeared to him as an angel, floating through his balcony window, kissing him and stroking his hair, bending to whisper in his ear and sing soothing songs to him.

*I've waited for you a hundred years  
I've watched you grow handsome through my tears.  
My deepest desire is to be your wife,  
To have you has my own for the rest of your life.*

When he awakened, the balcony window that had previously been bolted shut was open, and the statue had resumed her position by the brook once more. He arose to begin work with his father and continued through the day listless and dazed.

This happened repeatedly for over a month, Gabriel waking from his passionate dreams in a feverish state. Finally, the miller questioned his son's unwillingness to court any maidens of the village. But Gabriel had no interest in them and no answer for his father. After one particularly heated argument, Gabriel could stand it no longer and went to Persimmion for an answer. He fell on his knees and cried, pleadingly, "Stop taunting me. I am enamored of a statue who can never love me and become my wife. Let me free of my obsession, or I must leave this place and you forever." He stared up at her beautiful face as if he expected a response. Hearing none, he arose from his knees, touched her hip, and leaned close, saying, "Good-bye, my darling angel." With that, he softly kissed her. To his great surprise, his hand no longer felt a cold, stone hip but live, smooth flesh tinged with green. The mouth pressed against his was that of a living woman. The kiss, meant to be one of farewell, changed to one of salutation. After centuries of sadness and loneliness, Persimmion's tears finally stopped flowing.

With a voice hoarse from years of disuse, she said to him, "My beloved Gabriel, you broke the evil spell my mother cast to bind me so many years ago. My name is Persimmion, and I have loved you all your life."

Hand in hand, they walked to the house. Gabriel called to his father, "Come, meet the woman I love." The father was shocked to see a beautiful

young lady with long pale hair cascading over her shoulders and a wise look about her eyes. Most disturbing were the deep scars of many people's names emblazoned on her skin, some with hearts around them, and her delicate hand missing two fingers. Gabriel's mother could tell that Persimmion truly cared for her son and sensibly accepted Persimmion into her family.

Thus, after much rejoicing, Gabriel and his guardian angel married. They continued to live at the mill and eventually cleared away much of the woods around the house so peach trees could grow in the yard. For as Persimmion had stood there dreaming all those years of a place far beyond the wood, the world around her had changed, and her dreams had come to her.



## ***THE DAMSEL IN THE WELL***

High in the hills on a beautiful farm, surrounded by an idyllic landscape populated with a cornucopia of flora and fauna, lived the Sorrel family. Ma and Pa Sorrel were the third generation to work this land, and their hard work and prudence kept hunger and cold from their cabin door. They did well for themselves with only their small wooden farmhouse, their barn, and a couple of plow horses and chickens. The only thing missing from their life was children.

So it came to be that twin girls were born to the Sorrel family. They were christened Dulcet and Dorret. Dulcet was appropriately named, for she was sweet-tempered and quiet. Dorret was named after her grandmother, the strong woman who had settled the land they now worked.

When the girls lay in their bassinet, only two days old, their Aunt Gracie--who happened to be a witch--bestowed upon each of the girls a beautiful platinum charm necklace. Dulcet, the eldest by one hour, received a charm shaped like a W for wisdom. Dorret's charm was shaped like an I for intelligence. Now it would be easy to tell them apart. Gwendolyn Sorrel, the proud mother of the twins, profusely thanked her sister for the lockets and sent the witch home with a dozen jars of preserves.

As the girls grew older, they began to explore the meadows and woods around the farm. When they were four, they discovered an abandoned well hidden in the underbrush near the house. The well was overgrown with weeds, and the pulley had completely rusted to a dried-blood color. Crudely nailed boards covered the opening, and moss and ivy grew around it; it made the twins think of old, dead things. As they got close to it, they heard rustling noises and water dripping far, far away. At lunch that day, Dorret asked her father, "Pa, what is that hole in the ground with strange sounds inside?"

"It is your grandfather's old well," he replied, "and you must be careful to go nowhere near it. It only takes a teaspoon of water to drown little girls like you, and the well is many fathoms deep." He continued sadly. "Right after I was born, your grandmother disappeared near that well and was never seen

again. She never received a proper burial, and your grandfather was so distressed that he boarded it up and could not bear to look at it again. I suppose he made that well her sepulcher.”





After that, the twins avoided this “nasty, wicked well that wants to drown us.” But one night when the girls were eleven, Dorret had a very strange dream. In this vision, Dorret watched out of the small window in the attic that stood for the twins’ bedroom as a beautiful damsel rose out of the old abandoned well like a vapor. The damsel drifted through the tall grass toward the Sorrels’ home. As the figure floated closer to the house, she moved out of Dorret’s sight. Moments later a beautiful woman’s face with entrancing pale blue eyes appeared on the other side of the glass. In the light of the full moon, the woman’s expression looked blank, her eyes yearning, her colorless fingertips touching the glass inches from Dorret’s face.



The woman was clothed in shreds of a dress that had once been simple but elegant, seemingly from another era. The damsel’s teeth glinted in the moonlight as she sang to Dorret with the liquid voice of a nightingale.

*So many pearls  
for pretty girls.  
I love you dearly,  
I love you sweet.  
Come to the well,*



*and we shall meet.*

When Dorret awoke, the woman was gone, and in her place the full moon shone brightly through the window, so bright she thought it might blind her. The girl sat up and rubbed her eyes. Outside, far across the meadow, she heard a woman singing. It was the same voice she had heard in her dream. Dorret suddenly felt afraid. She had once read in a book that those who slept in the light of the full moon would surely go mad by morning and become lunatics. She leapt out of bed and carried her blankets and pillow into the closet. There she finally fell asleep, but only after she pushed a bit of clay into the keyhole to keep the moonlight from shining through.

The next day was Sunday, and Ma and Pa had taken the cart to town for a church social. Dorret sat in the garden, pensive and quiet, scarcely noticing the bright blue sky, the rustling of the aspens, the song of the starlings.

“Why are you so distracted, dear sister?” asked Dulcet. “You have scarcely spoken all morning.” After much coaxing, Dorret told her sister about the beautiful damsel in the well. Dulcet was curious. Was there truly a damsel in the well, or had Dorret simply been dreaming? Hand in hand, the girls ran to the well and pried off the wooden cover. They gazed down into the darkness. Listening very carefully, they heard the faraway sound of dripping water. Tentatively, Dorret called a greeting down into the well. “Hello!” she cried. A very faint voice sounding nothing like her own returned from a distance. “Hello,” it said, echoing her greeting.

Dorret excitedly turned to Dulcet. “See? I told you. She’s in there!”

“Dorret, your imagination has always been so strong,” Dulcet replied. “I’m sure it is only an echo.” This time Dulcet called, “My sister says you’re the damsel in the well. Is this true?” The reply wafted up from the depths of the well, echoing three times in the same ghostly voice, “True, true, true.”



Dulcet and Dorret lay peering down for a few moments longer, mesmerized by what had just occurred. Dulcet turned to Dorret and said, “This is very interesting and all, but Ma and Pa told us to be good. We should go back to the house and wait for them like we’re supposed to.”

As the twins turned to leave, they heard a soft, lilting voice answer from deep in the well:

*I’m eating cake.  
I’m wearing pearls.  
I have more cake  
for two good girls.  
I’m playing cards,  
the game of hearts.  
I need to fill  
two other parts.  
I am alone,  
please play with me.  
Come down the well  
and we’ll make three.*

Upon hearing this, Dorret ran back to the barn and fetched the lead rope for one of the horses. Dulcet ran after her, proclaiming that her younger sister should proceed more sensibly and not to rush into things.

“We have been afraid of this well for most of our lives,” Dulcet said. “It cannot be wise to jump into it. If you want to go, though, go ahead and drown yourself.”

Dorret was angry and impatient. “You are frightened and weak,” she said, “but I’m not. And when I climb out of the well with all my pearls, just you see if I share any with you!”

Then Dorret tied one end of the line to the remains of the well’s ragged rope with an adept knot, as any good farm girl could. She wrapped the new line around the arch that spanned the opening for good measure and began to lower herself into the black mouth of the well. She was frightened, of course, but determined not to let her older sister see.

After a while Dorret looked up and was shocked at how far she had descended. The mouth of the well was a small blue hole, her sister’s worried form a tiny silhouette. Then she looked down and saw nothing but darkness; the voice of the damsel grew louder, ever louder. In the narrow shaft of sunlight, Dorret saw something glinting far below.

*What a smart little girl.  
I long to see.  
Come more quickly,  
come join me!  
Join me,  
join me,  
join me.*

Dorret reached the slimy black bottom of the well and looked eagerly around for the pearls. When she took a step forward, her shoe nearly sank and she heard a crunching sound beneath the mud.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, Dorret saw that broken skeletons surrounded her. She lifted her foot to reveal a crushed skull. Her heart raced and she seized hold of the rope, anxious now to return to her sister.

But she saw something gleaming white-could it be the pearls? At that moment the damsel stepped out of the shadow. In her outstretched palm she held a pile of teeth.

“So many pearls...,” said the damsel, her laughter making the grating sound of an old hinge.

As the damsel drew near, Dorret saw that the woman’s pale flesh was decomposed in patches, her dark blue veins stitching the skin together crudely. Unlike the beautiful countenance Dorret saw in her dream, the damsel was missing pieces of her ears and the entirety of her nose. The specter’s thin hair hung like spider webs, revealing the shape of her skull. Her bones had broken through the skin at the elbow and wrist. The only thing similar to Dorret’s previous vision was the dress the damsel wore. Now the cold air of the well grew colder still and a smell of drowned, dead things, things rotting away in darkness and the damp permeated the air.

“How old are you, my dear?” asked the damsel, hungrily.

“I’m eleven,” said Dorret, frozen in place by fear.

“I am a two-thousand-year-old spirit, my dear, and I have no body but those I can steal. I stole your grandmother’s fifty years ago but her body is almost worn out. Now I must have yours!”



Dorret leapt for the rope and screamed to Dulcet to pull her up. The damsel clutched Dorret's right shoe, her grip terrible. Dorret screamed and tried to kick the damsel's hand away. Though the blows tore loose more of the

damsel's skin, the fiend did not relinquish her grip. At the mouth of the well, Dulcet pulled at the rope with all her might to no avail. Just when Dorret thought she could not pull herself away from the damsel, an idea came to her. She dug the toe of her left shoe into the heel of the shoe the damsel clutched and pried it off her foot. Dorret scrambled up the rope, leaving the damsel clutching her shoe. When she reached the top, Dorret rushed to embrace her sister.

Dulcet and Dorret vowed never to tell their parents about the damsel in the well. The damsel visited Dorret for the rest of her life but only in nightmares. For the evil spirit could not leave the well unless she found a new body, and to this day she has not found one.

And the moral of this story is "Intelligent girls escape the troubles wise girls avoid."



## ***THE BLACK RIVER***

Ivy sauntered along the pathway in the woods; she cooled herself with her collapsible fan and searched the ground for shining stones or hematite to add to her collection.

Ivy was a striking girl and her name suited her perfectly. She had green sparkling eyes the color of ivy, long dark hair that hung in tendrils like ivy, and like her leafy namesake, she was very curious and loved to wander and explore away from her home.

She particularly liked to meander about the forest and on the beach looking for shiny prizes. For Ivy admired the jewels and beads in notion stores and in shop windows, but because she was just a young farm girl who lived with her mother, she could not acquire them. Thus she used the stones she found on her beachcombing journeys in handcrafted jewelry and embroidery she created herself. In fact, as she wandered through the woods, Ivy wore a plain farm-girl dress that she had embroidered with leaves and ivy made of hematite.

Everyone thought Ivy was very clever because she could make something out of nothing. On this fine June day, Ivy's search led her to the Black River. It ran cold and strangely still. The water was clear but it was so deep that it appeared black. Many people had wandered near this river never to return, and Ivy's mother often warned her, "Beware of the Black River! It looks still and calm, but the dark tide pools can pull you under. Swans on the river have been heard to talk, and at night people have seen strange patterns of light illuminating the depths underwater." Ivy knew all this, but it did not stop her—she had a habit of going where people told her not to go.

Ivy wandered near the bank, hypnotized by the hum of dragonflies and other insects in the otherwise still air. Water lilies floated on the surface, slowly moving in a senseless circular dance downstream. The narcissus flowers lining the water bent to kiss their reflections, forming arches through which the lilies passed.



The sunlight glimmered and played on the water, making millions of diamonds, but something else caught Ivy's attention. There at her feet was a golden ring, the likes of which she had never seen before. The filigree was carved so intricately it was impossible to conceive that a human had wrought it.



If she squinted, Ivy could read the tiny words on the inside of the ring: "Property of POBR." What could it mean? She knew no one named Pobr.

Ivy slipped on the ring immediately, and to her sheer delight, it perfectly fit the pointing finger on her right hand. When she held her hand aloft to admire her lovely new bauble, she suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to plunge herself into the river. Her hand with the ring pointed, against her will, toward the swirling black waters of the river. Ivy tried to remove the ring but it would not come off her finger-it was as if the ring were part of her body, as if it had formed there while she was still in the womb. Every time she resisted, the ring yanked and jerked at her more strongly. She began to feel like a fish on the end of a fishing line-except that she was being pulled *into* the water, not out.



The girl resisted until she lost all strength. Wearily, she let her extended hand pull her forward into the Black River. She took a deep breath, and the chilly water rose up and consumed her as she fell headfirst into the blackness. Downward, ever downward into the depths of the river the ring pulled her, and

her heart beat faster and faster in her breast so that she could hear it pounding in her ears. Her clothing, once flowing and light, was now wet and heavy. It clung to her limbs, binding her and pulling her downward. Ivy tried to kick off her shoes, but she only managed to get one shoe loose. Tiny bubbles rushed past her as she sank but otherwise she saw only blackness.

Ivy thought of her beloved mother and of the tragedy of drowning at such a young age, when suddenly a large bubble rising from below popped against her face with a puff of air. She gratefully breathed in the air. After that, bubbles of air appeared more and more frequently and she managed to breathe fairly regularly.

After what seemed like ages, Ivy saw a weird luminescence far below-like the greenish phosphorescence she had seen on the shores of the river under the light of the full moon. For a moment she thought the glowing spot might be the moon and she suddenly became confused about whether she was going up or down. But as she neared the light, she saw that it came from a bubble dome structure that looked much like a large blue pearl and was about forty feet in diameter.

Next to the bubble dome, she found a large ring secured with a chain. Upon pulling it, the bubble dome opened and two doors slid back into the dome like elevator doors. Ivy entered and crawled through a hallway in which the ceiling was covered in ornate pressed tin images depicting what she assumed were fictional underwater scenes: battles between handsome men riding sea horses, others fighting squids and skates, and still more being crowned with wreaths by beautiful siren muses.

The floor was some kind of hardwood, varnished blue and polished to an unearthly sheen. Running down the center of the floor was a long and garish Oriental carpet that Ivy crawled on so that she might not hurt her knees. As she crawled, she regretted wrinkling the rug behind her, but it could not be helped. At the end of the hall she found two doors spanning from floor to ceiling, each with a tiny platinum handle.

Ivy turned the handles and unexpectedly catapulted into the center of a noisy, crowded dance hall. Ivy was so large in comparison to the people in the hall that she loomed over the ornately dressed couples. All fell silent and turned to stare at her, looking up at her aghast. The only sound in the hall was the sound of water dripping from her soaking clothes onto the mosaic floor. A

booming voice broke the unbearable silence, exclaiming, “So I see my crown has returned. Come to me, my beauty!” Ivy looked to the source of this voice, and at the far end of the hall on a splendid throne held aloft by two glistening opal dolphin statues, she saw a small handsome man with skin like ivory and mahogany hair. He beckoned to her.



As Ivy moved obediently toward the throne, the band struck up once more and the couples resumed their dance. Ivy noticed with increasing alarm that with each step she took, everything around her grew larger. It wasn't until the ring slipped down on her wrist like a bracelet that she realized that it was she

who was shrinking and not the others who were growing. By the time she was ten feet from the throne, the ring had become so large and heavy, she had to hold it in the crook of her arm. At the foot of the throne, Ivy presented the crown-for that was what she now realized it to be-to the prince.

She knew he was royalty, for when he took the crown and placed it on his head, it fit perfectly. Then he bowed to one knee and kissing her hand, introduced himself: "My lady, I am the prince of the Black River. Contrary to appearances here, I am not a formal ruler-everyone here calls me 'Blackie'." With a smile that revealed glistening white teeth, he extended his hand as an invitation to dance. She was so taken by his black eyes and charming ways, she conceded unhesitatingly, and he gracefully swept her onto the dance floor.

"Such a fine specimen of femininity should also have a name to match. What, pray tell, is your name?" When she told him, he burst into peals of merry laughter. "You're far from your roots now, Ivy," he said.

As they danced, Ivy put aside her confusion and began to take stock of her situation. "My mother always warned us there were strange things in the Black River, but I never suspected anything to spectacular," she said to her dance partner. "How is it that I came to be in this place, my Prince?" Ivy asked wonderingly.

"Please, Ivy, you need not be so formal. Please call me Blackie," said the prince. "The story of how I lost my crown is quite simple, really. Last week my footmen and I were lolling about by the banks of the Black River when we heard mortal hunters tramping noisily and clumsily through the underbrush. You mortals are always so ignorant, and whenever one of you sees us, you inevitably run about madly and trample us. Therefore, to avoid their inevitable idiocy, we jumped back into the river to escape being seen by the brutes."

"When we returned to our underwater palace, I found to my dismay that I had left my crown on the grass by the river. I immediately cast a spell that would return the crown to me within a week. I expected to see it served to me in the belly of a fish but my fishing caught another prize entirely," he said smiling.

At this, Ivy blushed and when the prince kissed her hand, she turned positively scarlet. "You are so different from other humans. You are so lovely and calm," he told her.

As they continued to spin about the dance floor, Ivy looked around at the other dancing couples. They seemed to change shape as she watched. First a cod then a funny man resembling cod danced with a woman clad in yellow who turned into a chicken in a dress. Shape shifting was not limited to the dancers: the cakes on the table turned into meat; the wine bottles turned into urns filled with magnificent roses and then back into wine bottles. And all this happened to the tune of warbling musical instruments which themselves changed from a harp into a cello in the blink of an eye as the adept musicians played on. Nothing seemed solid in this strange place. With all the rhythmic swarming and swaying, Ivy became positively seasick. The last things she saw before she swooned and everything turned black were the prince's strange white teeth.



When her eyes next opened, Ivy found she had slept. She was ready to believe it was just a dream when she realized that she was not at home underneath her favorite patchwork quilt but rather lying in an expansive canopy bed under a yellow silk coverlet. She thought of the bizarre night before and the



shape-shifting couples. She then thought of the striking prince and racked her brain trying to remember...hadn't he also changed? Strange images flashed in the back of her mind but she couldn't wrestle them to the foreground. A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Come in," Ivy called tentatively. A pretty, diminutive maid with a mouth like a trout and wet-looking black hair plastered to her head entered the room. She carried a silver tray with a large teapot and two eggs, which she set on a nearby table. With a neat curtsy, she left the room, closing the door with a little click.

Ivy arose and moved toward the table. She lifted the lid of the teapot to find some strange black tea. She cracked the first egg and tasted it; it was the most delicious egg she had ever eaten in her life and she hungrily consumed it. When she cracked the second, she found no egg, but rather a note that read:

*Will you be so kind as to join me on the veranda this afternoon?*

*It is located in the northeastern wing of the palace.*

*I must show you so many exquisite things!*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Prince Blackie*

Ivy held the note. She was stricken for a moment but then looked to find her shift and camisole she had worn the previous night. They were not to be found. In the corner she found a large solid closet carved with mermaids pouring water from urns down the length. She approached it, gingerly opened it, and found to her delight a beautiful turquoise crushed-velvet gown covered in a pattern of abalone sequins and brocade. She tied the sash and it fit perfectly. At the bottom of the closet sat delicate matching shoes with tiny straps held with a pearl. These also fit like a charm.

Ivy was so moved by her exquisite gifts that tears welled in her eyes. Her affection for the prince overcame her and she tried to hold it back. She still wanted to remain sensible and not be consumed by a stranger bearing lavish gifts. This she tried to keep in mind as she strode toward the veranda. But when the stunning prince came into sight, all rationality disappeared and she fell into his arms, thanking him profusely.

"You look ravishing," he said with a rakish smile. "Come, let me show you my kingdom." That afternoon he took her to a panoramic underwater viewing

window to view the sea horse races. They sat on Roman-style benches sipping kelp juleps as mermen in multicolored livery flogged their steeds in the waters outside the bubble dome. Ivy won every bet. Then they enjoyed a late luncheon of oysters Rockefeller at the Atlantis Restaurant--it was built of the ruins of that famous city.

As they dined on crab cakes and caviar, they sat on an ornate balcony overlooking jewel-encrusted sirens performing water ballet in a pool below. Later that evening Prince Blackie took Ivy to dinner in a dark room lined in silver paper flocked with a blue velvet pattern. Only two long tapers held by wall sconces lit the room. The black water of the deep river could be seen through portholes ringed with the silver that lined the room. Through these portholes, Ivy could see strange glowing and semitransparent fish with cavernous jaws. They flowed by ominously and seemed to stare sightlessly at her.

The prince took her hand, looked at her with his penetrating black eyes and then ever so softly kissed her waiting lips. Ivy swooned. His ivory skin glowed in the candlelight and his black eyes seemed to become even darker as he whispered in her ear, "Marry me, Ivy. Live with me forever."

Despite his charms and affluence, she hesitated, knowing intuitively that there must be a stipulation. "If I am your bride, how can my family attend the wedding?" she asked.



“They cannot,” he answered, stroking her hair. “But I can promise you a sumptuous wedding and a life of ease, filled with beautiful trinkets and flowing gowns.” Ivy was impressed by his offers of opulence. Her dull life above seemed so boring and shabby in comparison. This was what she had always

dreamed of. It all seemed too fast and surreal, and she felt anxious but didn't know why. She turned to Blackie and said, "Please, beloved prince, if you really love me as you say, you will allow me time to sort my thoughts."

"I can only give you one full day," he responded with a grim aspect. "After that, unless you marry me, the spell will weaken. You'll become too large for us to keep you here in the bubble, and we'll have to return you to the cold river. We could never see each other again." At this, he looked desperate. "I will come to your room next evening and then I will hear your decision. A servant will show you to your room. Good night for now, my precious. I will see you in my dreams."

That night Ivy lay tormented in her canopy bed and what little sleep she did get was filled with nightmares of swimming alone in a black sea at night. In the dream she felt huge, dark creatures in the water under her feet, bumping against her legs. When she looked down, she saw a pack of black wolves circling her underwater.

The whole next day Ivy fretted and gazed out the window to the courtyard below where fountains made their ever-changing crystalline formations while swans drifted lazily among the patterns. She looked out over the expanse of the underwater city, past the river that divided the bubble dome kingdom in two. As she looked up to the top of the bubble dome and the many exotic fish swimming around it, she thought she caught a glimmer of the sun she knew must be far, far above.



Ivy absently twisted the drapery with her delicate hands as she thought about having to leave this wonderful place for the doldrums that had been her previous existence. The palace was beautiful and expansive and she could not imagine tiring of it or the prince and his loving gaze any time soon but she

would miss her humble home, doting mother, and her patchwork quilt. It was, after all, the only life she had ever known. She had been ripped so suddenly and unexpectedly from her life. Would she miss the simplicity of the grass and sunlight? Her mother must be worried sick by now.

If she went back, she could say she had been lost in the woods. She would slip into her old pattern, eventually find another lover, marry, and have a home. In time this misadventure would fade into memory and become just another dream, a strange and good dream that had lasted for days. What do days matter in a lifetime of years. Of decades? As an old woman on her deathbed, perhaps she would think back for a moment to the Black River.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. The pretty trout-mouthed maid entered with another serving of tea and eggs. This time Ivy rushed directly to the second egg and cracked it open. “I love you,” the note inside read. After showering in the opulent bathroom and dressing herself in yet another wonderful gown, Ivy had a visit from Prince Blackie. He fell to his knees and grasped her hand as he pleaded for an answer to his marriage proposal.



“Yes,” whispered Ivy. “I will marry you and live with you forever.”

The wedding that ensued was the most lavish the kingdom had ever seen. Ivy and Blackie and the wedding procession rode enormous black swans to an island in the middle of the great indoor river. Eleven beautiful maidens dressed in aqua silk held Ivy's train. As she slowly walked down the aisle, pearls and pink coral were scattered behind her. A shape-shifting judge transformed into a swordfish while he read the vows.

Ivy was presented with a crown much like the one she had found--had it only been days since her arrival here?--but hers was embossed with abalone and mother-of-pearl. As they kissed, the celebrating crowd set off a fleet of torpedoes that passed over the dome, exploding colorfully. Everyone cheered.



A monumental triple-layer wedding cake floated down the river on a lapis lazuli barge pulled by tiny mermaid babies balanced on the backs of trick dolphins. As the babies held the dolphins' silver bridles, they served pieces of cake to everyone in the kingdom. Those who bit too hard cracked their teeth on



the precious gems and treasures hidden inside. Wine flowed in abundance. Dancing girls balancing tall clear urns of fish moved among the wedding throng, granting wishes with royal wands reserved for such occasions. It was indeed quite an event.

Later that evening in the half light, next to her sleeping husband, Ivy lay awake and gazed at the crown that hung on a hook over the wedding bed. It gleamed softly in the half light, mimicked perfectly by the light that glinted in her slow, salty tears.

In the days that followed the wedding, Blackie tried to keep his wife entertained with all sorts of amusements and exotic delicacies. Ivy found them increasingly monotonous, the food tasteless. All the shape shifting and transformations around her made everything feel so immaterial. She felt uprooted and claustrophobic, unable to wander beyond the walls of the dome, unable to feel the sunlight.

When she went to the kitchen and offered to help the scullery maids with the dishes, they gently refused her: "This is not the place for you, my lady," they said. When she asked the trout-mouthed maid for a needle with which to embroider, the flustered servant insisted on embroidering for her, "My lady, you mustn't mar your delicate fingers!" Ivy became despondent from being so idle—no matter how much gold and jewels Blackie lavished on her, she felt worthless.

Ivy was inconsolable. Everything about her began to droop. Her hair thinned and became lifeless. She had sunken eyes and a sickly pallor. Nothing seemed to cure her of her consumptive sadness, her longing to see the world above once more. She longed for the simple things that life once held for her. She was wasting away in grandeur. Every night, after refusing the lavish meals that were served to her on silver platters, she pled with her husband to let her at least visit her home. He was kind and patient, but he reminded her that if she went back, she might never return. Finally, Ivy took to her bed, and over a period of days, her condition deteriorated to the point at which Blackie called a doctor. A squid wearing a topcoat arrived at Ivy's bedside, and poking and squeezing her neck once or twice with a tentacle, announced that unless Ivy returned to her previous home, she would surely die from a combination of vitamin deficiencies and ennui.

Blackie had no choice but to concede. The prince of the Black River leaned over his feverish wife and whispered lovingly in her ear, "I will give up my kingdom and take you home, for it is better to have you alive and not in my kingdom than not to have you at all. Once we leave this place, you can never come back. But there is a magic spell that governs all of us who live under the Black River:

*Not hair nor nails nor teeth nor hide  
Fall from the place where you abide.  
For if you do, consuming thirst  
For blood will uncover you first.  
And second, you cannot return  
To this your home and you will learn.*

So it was that in the middle of the next night, they boarded an enchanted bubble that would take them to the surface. They brought nothing from the lavish kingdom save for a small satchel of flawless black pearls and the crowns they had worn on their heads. They avoided the mayhem of the public, leaving behind only a note appointing the prince's younger brother as ruler.



They rose slowly through the dark water and as they did Prince Blackie held Ivy in his arms and whispered a mellifluous song in her ear:

*The moon reflects the water's edge*

*Separating worlds between you and I.  
How I long for the deep black waters.  
How you long for the earth and sky.  
All will be fine, never cry.*

They continued to rise until they saw the crescent moon shining down through the water. When they surfaced, the bubble popped, and they swam to shore. There they lay, panting, until sunrise, while they devised a convincing story to tell her family.

As the sun grew in the sky, they, too, became larger until finally they were proper human size. They reached the farmhouse, and Ivy knocked on the door. Her mother was happy and relieved to see her missing daughter.

"Why, Ivy, you've been gone for a little over a year," said her mother, and Ivy realized that time under the Black River ran differently. What she thought had been merely a passing of weeks had been a passing of months in the world above. "I took you for dead!" continued her mother. "It does this poor old woman's heart good to see the face of my beautiful daughter again. And who is this handsome young man accompanying you?"

Blackie stepped forward and said, "Your daughter fell into the Black River and was carried by the currents of the ocean, where I caught her half drowned in my net. When I revived her, she could not remember her name or from where she came. Slowly it came to her, but during the time of her recovery, we fell in love and were married." With this, he bowed deeply to his mother-in-law. She was flattered by his genteel demeanor and was surprised to hear that this seemingly regal character was a sailor. At the same time, Ivy's mother was deeply heartbroken at the news, for she had missed her only daughter's wedding. She planned another celebration to make up for it-a celebration to honor her daughter's return.

A few weeks later her mother cooked Ivy's favorite hearty stew with vegetables from the garden and Ivy baked a loaf of bread in the shape of a swan for her husband. She also made him a wedding present of a lock of her hair braided into a watch fob. Although he had never made anything in his life, Blackie carved a piece of whalebone into a corset stay with a scrimshaw pattern depicting a baby mermaid on a dolphin for Ivy. The local priest said a few simple words, gave thanks for their return and blessed their future. For wedding

rings, Ivy and Blackie used the Black River crowns, which, of course, had remained small. A few close friends and relatives joined them for wine afterward.

Blackie bought a simple house with a few of the black pearls he had brought from his kingdom and a modest boat with which he could ply his new trade as a fisherman. Ivy and Blackie had received some wedding gifts that they put in their humble and beautiful home, which soon had ivy growing up the latticework on the front. For her part, Ivy was truly content rocking on the front porch, doing her embroidery and cooking soup as she waited for Blackie to come home to her loving arms. For she had realized that although she still loved to wander, she could not stray too far from her roots.

Everything seemed wonderful until a few months later when Blackie didn't come home one night. What Ivy did not know was that on that day, her husband had caught in his net a fanciful miniature sea horse with an intricately worked saddle and matching blinders. This reminded him of his kingdom and all that he had lost. Blackie was overwhelmed with a thirst of sorts and he went to the tavern to drown his tears in red wine. Over the following weeks, his temperament became wicked and distant. He acted nothing like the sweet prince Ivy had met and loved so long ago. Blackie began to stay away from home more and he spent many nights carousing with his sailor friends, drinking and only the devil knew what else! One late evening he even came home with a rough bleeding tattoo, a picture of an anchor with her name, Ivy, on top. He said he did it to remind himself how she weighed him down.

Blackie became cruel. He even struck poor Ivy, bellowing, "I lost a kingdom and for what? A woman! I know now that no mere woman, let alone a mortal, is worth it." He crushed his poor wife's heart into dust. Again, Ivy began to waste away, just as she had when she felt trapped beneath the bubble dome. Blackie did not act as though he cared very much. He usually came home from fishing, sullenly ate his dinner, and left the table and didn't come back again until early dawn.



Because he was not allowed to leave any part of himself in the mortal world, Blackie had not cut his hair or his beard since they arrived and now looked no more like his former self than he acted. He resembled a frightening vengeful cur, and the only attention he paid Ivy was when he made advances to her in bed while she lay sick from the ghastly stench of his drinking. Life, it seemed, could not be worse. If Ivy had known that her kind and beautiful prince would transform into this hideous monstrosity he had become, she would certainly never have left the river.

One winter night, after many months of misery, Ivy contemplated her situation as she wistfully stirred the soup that she would eat in solitude. She noticed how the spoon made little whirlpools in the soup, reminding her of the suctioning pull of the Black River on that day many months earlier. A weird howling outside suddenly interrupted her meditation. Ivy thought it was probably only the wind but still she went to lock the windows and the doors.

That evening the air became bitter and every small sound put her on edge. The ticking of the clock in the parlor mimicked the beating of her heart. She imagined her veins standing out against her thin skin, defenseless, throbbing with blood. She screamed as the howling began once more. Now it was closer and much louder. She backed away from the door and window. Her thoughts

turned to Blackie. Where, for the love of God, was Blackie? Why was he not here when she needed him the most?



The pot of soup began to boil over, and when she went to attend to it, a hideous sight in the window shocked her. A large wolf with piercing black eyes stared in through the windowpane. It threw itself at the glass, shattering it, and howled in pain, leaving streaks of blood running from the shards. Its jaws held the remains of something recently slaughtered.

She screamed and backed away against the far wall. The sight before her was so frightful, her mind could barely comprehend it. Then, as abruptly as it had come, the wolf vanished. The house was silent save for the ticking of the clock. The window was black, open, and ominous. Ivy sat by the fire in her rocking chair, holding a kitchen knife in her hand and ceaselessly staring at the window until her husband's return.

As traces of sunlight transformed the black sky outside into lavender, Blackie finally returned home. "Where on earth have you been?" asked Ivy. Then she noticed the fresh blood on his clothing. "What gruesome deed have you performed this evening?"

"I've done nothing," he replied. "I was mixed up in a row, and someone popped me in the nose. I come home to finally find some solace and instead what do I get? A nagging woman!"

"I was almost killed by a vicious wolf!" she retorted quickly. "While you were out carousing, who was here to defend me? I could have been killed. And then where would you be?" She said this to affect him, but she did not expect him to fall to the floor sobbing.





"I'm sorry, Ivy. I love you. I did not mean for our lives to be this way." She began to stroke his matted hair and soothe him. She was deeply saddened and confused. They went to bed and fell asleep but nightmares of the shape-shifting dancing couples in the kingdom under the Black River plagued her sleep. Her whole adventure there seemed as if it had all been a dream. Perhaps the lie she had told her mother was actually the truth and Blackie was actually just a rough sailor who had rescued her from the deep. Nothing seemed real anymore or had any sense to it.

The next day the entire community was shocked. A wandering traveler had been found near the woods behind a neighboring pasture. A pack of wolves that came down from the mountain had ripped him apart. Many people suspected demons to be the actual cause, for they could attest to hearing a blood-chilling howling that was strange, not like that of a wolf.

Ivy, among others, was thrown into a panic-their house was so exposed, and a pack of wolves would find it a very attractive target. So she became outraged the following evening when, despite this news, Blackie insisted on going out drinking with his comrades again instead of staying home and putting her at ease.

"If you leave this house," she threatened, "I won't be here when you return." He merely glared at her before he shut the door. She threw a plate, shattering it, against the door and sat down and cried. She wanted to return to her mother's house but her anger toward her husband was nothing compared to her fear of the wolves finding her alone on the dark road away from their home.

Ivy locked the window again and sat by the fire nervously embroidering and rocking. She jumped as the clock struck midnight. On the final toll, her heart stopped as she heard the howl of the wolf once more. Plaintive and frightening, the noise grew louder. Ivy ran to get the knife. The wolf was outside her house again. It sounded unearthly, like the devil himself had come straight from hell to open her veins.



The great black wolf's head appeared suddenly in her window again, its sharp, white, adept teeth glinting behind the paneless window. Its eyes looked human. "Go away!" she screamed. She was surprised when it obeyed. Moments later she heard it crashing against the door, howling. Something about its call

seemed familiar. Ivy's mind struggled to recognize it, but when she did, she blocked it out of her perception. The connection she made was much too hideous to bear.

In a panic, she realized she had forgotten to lock the door. She rushed and pushed against it with all her strength to hold it shut. Her hand wavered as it reached for the bolt but the wolf was incredibly powerful. It forced its paw through the door but with a sudden burst of strength, Ivy slammed the door, severing the wolf's paw from its arm and leaving the wolf howling on the outside.

As the cries faded into the distance, Ivy was astounded and sickened as she watched the wolf's paw in a bloody pool before her transform into a man's hand wearing her husband's wedding ring.

That night, through a veil of tears, Ivy carefully wrapped the hand in cloth. The following morning she left the house to search for her husband, the former Prince Blackie. She finally found him wandering by the Black River, holding his severed bleeding wrist wrapped in his shirt. Blackie shuffled aimlessly and stared at her with unseeing eyes-he was deathly pale and muttering to himself, "Not hair nor stitch nor teeth nor hide..." Ivy took her stricken husband home and cauterized his wound with a hot poker from the fire.



After this experience, Blackie had an extreme change of heart. Now he could never return to reign over the Black River kingdom because he had lost a crucial part of himself in the world above. Finally, he cut his hair and beard and groomed his fingernails. This action not only returned him to his former

appearance-save for the exception of the hand and a clearer, more sagacious look about the eyes-but also helped him regain his clever, kind personality.

Years later Blackie remembered this episode as being surreal and could barely recall anything from his time as a werewolf. He became a good, hardworking fisherman and dutifully worked with his net to come home smelling of nothing but brine.

Evenings, the sailor kissed his patient wife and sat by the fire polishing to a sheen the lovely ivory hook that now stood in place of his hand. Embossed into the base of the hook was the glinting wedding ring that had once been his crown-forever reminding the former prince of his reign under the deep waters of the Black River.



## ***THE SIREN SHIP***

The alluring water lapped at the beach, while soft lights reflected off the waves, glistening against them and shining like luring beacons to the sailors. The logical source of this light was the moon, but another source was said to luminously glow far away on an island.

Eighty-three years previously, a little girl accidentally washed out to sea in a small boat. She disappeared for two weeks, and everyone look her for dead, her family mourning bitterly. On the first day of the third week, however, they heard a familiar cry at the door and were overwhelmed with relief and joy when they found their daughter had returned to them safe and healthy.



When asked where she had been, she answered with this story, a story that never wavered in time even though she is now an old woman. She claimed she crashed into an island only seen at low tide that was completely inhabited



by beautiful women, white and wormlike, their flesh and waxen hair so pale they glowed in the dark. From their heads grew long and twisting tapered horns, and instead of legs, they had iridescent fish tails. They could turn their tails into legs if they chose, but they mostly kept their fins because they never had much use for legs and thought them less attractive anyway.

They lit fires on the rock and sang songs about their life under the sea while playing beautiful exotic instruments they made from shells and coral. They seemed like ghosts but were not. In fact, they were very aware of their mortality, despite the fact they could each live for one hundred and fifty years. They cultivated their children inside empty oyster shells, and after gestating them the proper amount of time, they plucked them from the shell to join them. Their skin and body remained supple and nubile until the moment they died, age manifesting itself only in the depths of their eyes and by their lilting voices turning old and crabby.



They were deeply afraid of and despised the squids and sharks that lived in the water surrounding their island, and oftentimes they played mean pranks on them or killed them for fun. They sat by their fire and ravenously ate shellfish and lobster, the while smoke from the fire spiraling upward much like

their horns. They also made simple smoke rings and jumped through them or made interlocking rings that rose high in the sky and dissolved.

They tried to convince the old woman, who was then a child, to be their daughter, but after two weeks she still cried and missed her home on land. They kindly repaired her boat and with kisses, wreaths of kelp, and fond farewells, led her back to shore.



The old woman told this story for many years and would readily tell anyone who cared to listen. Young boys who grew to be sailors longingly gazed at the glow on the ocean and the strange circular clouds arising from nowhere to surround the moon. Some said they heard the songs of these women while they sailed, but no one had ever really seen them.

One night as large cargo ship loaded with precious spices and jewels sailed past the vicinity where the island was supposedly located, something hit the ship so hard, the boat almost capsized. Large tentacles reached over the bow of the ship, grabbed some of the sailors on board, and dragged them screaming into the ocean. It was then they realized a giant squid had attacked the ship.





It eventually dragged the entire ship into the ocean. A few men struggled to remain on the surface, but in the end all lost their battle with death.

The boat later resurfaced and floated aimlessly on its side, the valuable cargo now rattling worthlessly inside the hull. After a couple of months, it bumped into an island and washed ashore.

That evening several white luminous figures dragged themselves out of the ocean toward the ship, talking among themselves in low hushed voices as they examined the ruins and cargo within. This escalated into exclamations of joy as they soon found one treasure after another. Soon the island was covered by sirens dripping in glistening, luxurious jewels, lounging and eating their lobster off silver-embossed platters as they wove pearls into each other's hair--the pearls imitating and highlighting the whiteness there as they gazed at themselves in their new-found silver hand mirrors.

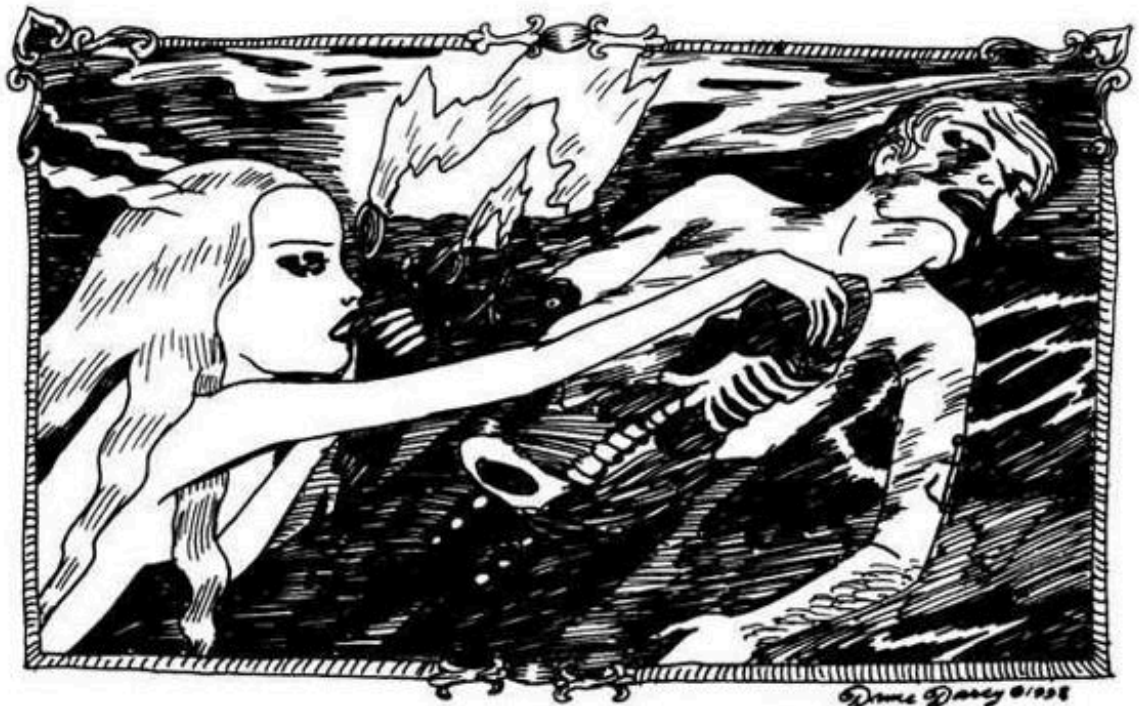


The sirens had never seen this many incredible earthly belongings before, and it gave them a lust for more. Their favorite treasures were the telescope and compass. Fights broke out as to who should own them, but the conflict was settled in a lady-like way when one siren acquired both in a bet. After they divided the remaining treasures, the sirens focused on the ship, which they promptly set to rebuild. They worked for hours, the last touch being the replacement of the figurehead they unknowingly made in their image.

Laughing all the while, they placed a crown of shells in her waving wooden locks. They planned to set sail the following twilight.

The first ship they came across was much smaller than theirs and not much cargo was to be had, but they stole what there was with relish, leaving the crew tied to the mast. The next day they came across a larger craft. The sailors on board fought well but the sirens won with a vengeance and victoriously carried the cargo back to the island.





Soon the story spread of beautiful, strange women, glowing white like ghosts with long tapered horns, killing sailors with swords and stealing the booty. Some laughed and claimed the victims were mad, making up stories to glorify their loss; others believed the women were actually ghosts and tried to anoint their ships with spells and charms for good luck. Either way, no one ever caught the siren ship, and you can still see the strange luminous lights from the coast.





***THE QUEEN OF SPADES***



The Queen of Spades was a striking creature, her skin pale as abalone, her hair the color of fresh blood, matching her crimson, heart-shaped mouth; her wit was sharp (though demented, and her steel gray eyes cut like a knife anyone who dared oppose her.

She lived in a basement, a hole in the earth really, that most people wouldn't look twice at. Leaves and filth always covered steps leading down into it, thus giving it the appearance of being abandoned. She liked it this way.

Inside the door the hapless victim or ghoulish guest was met with a dazzling sight: luxurious golden candelabras, cherubs floating over the marble fireplace dripping with exotic jewels. And from one wall, the icing on the cake--a large, protruding wooden arm holding a shining silver bowl of golden fringe (this was her fringe holder), placed there, easily at reach, for whenever she needed to add fringe to something.

Her collection of parasols and cloaks were the envy of everyone, her linen the finest, her velvet the softest, her frames and mirrors the most gilded.

She spent most of the day sleeping, writing correspondence to her many admirers, and sewing (only for herself), and when it grew dark, she claimed to be a fortune-teller (by appointment, of course). She had no husband, but was loved by many.

She received the newspaper early in the week as she always did and read only the section that concerned her: the comics and the obituaries. She was very excited this week because a middle-aged woman of wealthy lineage had been freshly buried on Wednesday. The Queen of Spades waited until the weekend, though, because the moon would shine brighter and fewer mourners would be hanging around getting in her way with their petty observations.

She prepared for her task at dusk when the night surrounded her like a sweet, familiar cloak of blackness. It was only then that she emerged from her home, leaving for work shielded in darkness. The only tool of her trade was a spade. She toiled mostly by full moon so the light of a lantern wouldn't give her away. By the glow of this moon she made her way with conviction to the cemetery.



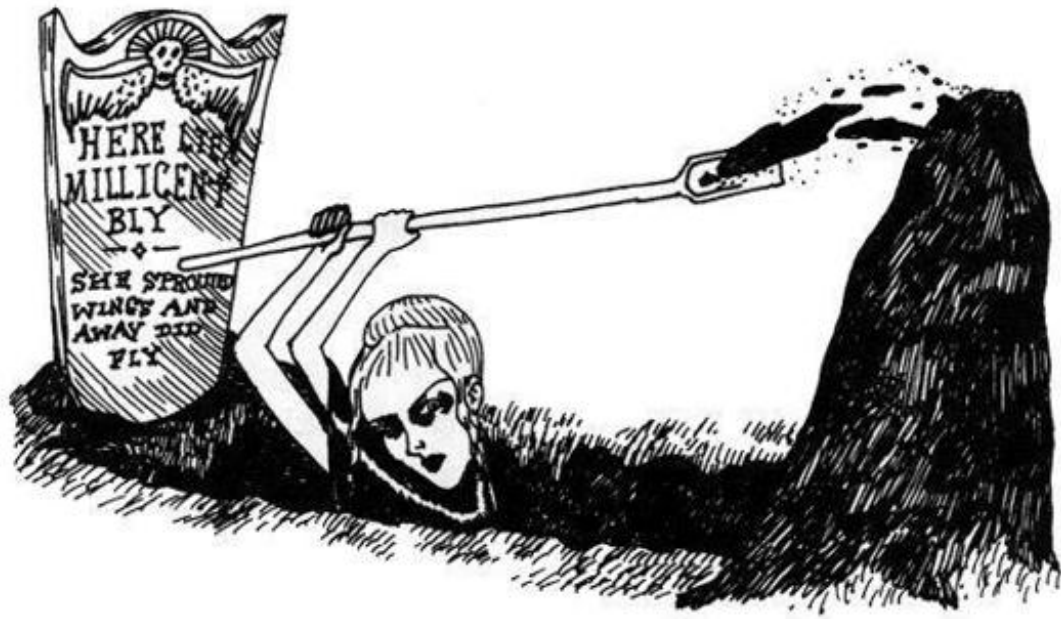
As she strolled to the graveyard whistling tunelessly to herself, she heard a whistle mock her in reply from the top of a tree. She looked up to see the ghost of a thin young man in a battered vest and top hat. His teeth were either

knocked out or black (she could not tell which and she didn't care), and his throat had been slit open, black clotted blood running down his neck and smearing the front of his shirt. She ignored him and continued on.

She hated this cemetery in particular because of its strong lock and guard dog policy but she was accustomed to these little inconveniences, and when she failed to open the lock with her buttonhook, she went immediately around back. She looked perplexed for a moment as she regarded the tall, intricately embossed wrought iron bars tipped with foreboding spears. Propping her spade against them, she slipped her button-up boot with deep azure spats into the handle, then pulled her long, nimble, ivory limbs. Grasping one of the spears, she balanced on the top, swung her spade to the other side, and climbed down using the same method.

Once on the ground, she heard a sound from far away. The dogs howled and came closer. As they neared, she made her shovel ready for the attack. The Queen of Spades had a method of disabling her attackers with her spade by swiftly applying the edge to their temples; this, she had found though much trial and error, could temporarily disable or kill her rival, whether it be man or beast. She also had a way of hypnotizing them with her eyes as she swung the shovel so they never knew what hit them.

As the dogs approached, she got her spade ready to do the deed it had done so many times before. The first dog neared and as she struck it, she felt a temporary surge of adrenaline mixed with satisfaction. It howled and lay on the ground dead. Its comrades soon joined it after the Queen of Spades had her way with them. She wiped off her bloody spade on the grass and continued onward, searching eagerly for the gravestone of Mrs. Millicent Bly, which she finally found near the gate. She began to dig, pausing only at brief intervals to see if anyone approached to apprehend her wicked deed, never ceasing until she struck the lid of the coffin.



She pried open the lid of the coffin, and the familiar stench hit her then. The jewels glistened in the moonlight, enveloping Mrs. Bly's neck and glimmering tauntingly on her breast. On her fingers shone ruby rings of varying sizes (she must have been born in July): these she quickly pocketed, as well as the rest of the jewelry. She shut the lid and finished filling in the grave by 2:30. She replaced the last gardenia with a flourish then looked critically back at her work. The dirt had been lowered a few inches (there's never quite enough), but other than that there was no sign of suspicion. She congratulated herself for a job well done, jingling the jewels in her pocket as she strode toward the gate where she had entered.

As she neared, she saw the dogs and noticed one of them still breathed. She simply kicked it once and it stopped. She stepped over it and climbed lightly over the fence. When she had safely cleared it, she walked briskly home, not looking back. While walking, she tried as hard as she could to envision the woman's face from whom she had just taken the jewelry, but to no avail. All that would materialize was the picture of her Great Aunt Augusta still in the frame lying on the body of the corpse, covering the face.

The Queen of Spades didn't know what to think of this but nonetheless found it amusing as she continued homeward in the daybreak, whistling tunelessly to herself. As her key turned in the latch to her door, she heard the rooster next door crow, signaling that she had broken her record and had

completed her excursion by sunrise. She entered her home and carefully laid her booty on the plush, dark crimson Oriental rug. Her eyes gleamed greedily as she began to conceive of her fortune. By midmorning she estimated the value of her wares to come in easily at a couple of grand. These she could hock to her connections by the end of the week and buy that taxidermied python frozen in the act of eating the taxidermied vole she'd had her eye on for so long.

She changed into her white silk nightgown with the lace collar that simulated the froth of the ocean surrounding her creamy neck. Then placing her head on her key lime pillowcases, she spread her dark red hair around her and slipped into a sleep that lasted for three days.

While in her coma like trance, she dreamed the most horrific dreams. She envisioned herself at the age of four, sitting on her grandfather's knee while the music of the neighbor's calliope wafted around the back porch through the summer air. She laid her head on his chest and listened to the rumble of his voice talking to her uncles, producing words she was too tired to bother to understand. At this moment giant gears churned in front of her crushing out all other reality and prohibiting her from going any farther in the dream or escaping through the act of waking. Finally she was awakened by a sound that escalated to a pounding on her door, almost breaking it from the hinges.

She arose and staggered to the door, cautiously peering out of the keyhole. She saw it was her comrade Mr. Briggs and promptly let him in. She knew him through gambling circles. The Queen of Spades was adept at playing blackjack due to her psychic abilities, thus assuring that she would double the stolen fortune she bet if not merely break even.

He began to chide her about still being dressed in her nightgown at four in the afternoon, but he went on to say he liked the sight of it anyway and offered her a cigarette. This she took eagerly and sat on her double divan, casually draping her arm over the back. She looked up at him, inquiring only with her eyes the reason for his visit.

Briggs began promptly (which was his nature) to explain that he had heard of the recent death of an extremely wealthy young lady and would give her the exact location of the grave site if she gave him a percentage of the goods. After they worked out exactly what the percentage would be, the Queen

of Spades agreed and led him to the door, where he fondly kissed her hand before she bade him farewell. She began to make some tea and prepare herself for her next job.



That evening on the way to the graveyard, her nerves were on edge. She felt weary and distracted despite the long rest. Leaves rustled behind her, blown by the wind, and she jumped. A feeling of foreboding hung thickly in the air. The Queen of Spades tried to ignore it as she successfully picked the lock with her ever trusted silver buttonhook. She silently walked in and shut the gate behind her. Although the rich populated this particular graveyard, it was older and no guards of any kind appeared to hinder her destination.

She found herself surrounded by urns overgrown with crawling vines. Some women with long hair clung desperately to sunken crucifixes, while in the background hands appeared from marble clouds clasped in eternal love. Many of the angels were headless.

She finally came to the recently dug grave of her newest benefactor. The freshly dug soil was strewn with lilies as the headstone read, "As the roses are sweetened with dew so the world was sweetened with you. Constance Penelope Byrne." How her parents must have adored her and how crushed they surely were when their twenty-three-year-old daughter passed away without ever marrying. The Queen of Spades began to turn the earth, and as she did, her head began to swim until finally she had to stop. She sat back and patted her brow with her red handkerchief. She had no idea why she felt so ill. As she continued on, the sound of the wind (it must be the wind) moaned a little way off, sending a cold chill down her spine.

She knew it was time (what was true?) she shook her head of delirium and continued on. She struck the shiny new lid of the coffin and opened it

without trouble. The sight that met her gaze was glorious: an ivory cameo, fine diamond brooches, two rings, and a solid gold buckle with four emeralds. A veritable fortune gleamed up from the fortunate. Constance had a pensive, sad expression as she lay motionless, coins covering her eyes. Black hair framed her pale face and hung limply on her breast.

The Queen of Spades sat Constance up to undo the hook on the back of the velvet choker bearing the ivory cameo. As she did, the coins fell off her eyes, which opened widely and mimicked the shocked expression the Queen of Spades simultaneously wore. Constance looked around and gasped for air. "Where am I?" and "Who are you?" Then seeing the walls of black dirt surrounding her, she screamed, "They buried me alive!"

Constance began to shriek and tried to scramble out of the grave, which threw the Queen of Spades into a panic. Afraid of being convicted, she pushed the girl back into the coffin and struck her with the spade, abruptly silencing her screams. She left the choker and quickly took three brooches and the rings, replaced the lid and filled in the grave as quickly as she could, then ran from the cemetery like her dress was on fire. As she ran, the young woman's surprised, tormented eyes taunted her. They seemed to surround her even though the cemetery rapidly faded into the distance behind her. She swore she could still hear Constance's shrieks and cries of confusion and fury.







She ran to her home and bolted the door. She put on her nightgown and left the jewels in the pocket of her deep green velvet dress. She didn't care if she ever saw them again. The incident that night made her think for the first

time of getting out of the business. Slowly, her whirling thoughts subsided, and as the hazy blanket of slumber closed in around her, she swore she saw a vision of someone in the room with her before she lost consciousness.

When she awoke it was with a start; something cold and solid was in her mouth. She sat up and spit the object into her hand, then gasped in alarm. The brooches and rings stolen previously from Constance sat gleaming in her palm. She dropped them as if they were vile insects, and she immediately began making arrangements to hock them to her connections and be rid of them forever. That evening three big men in black suits rang the bell. They talked her down to a fraction of the jewels' worth, but the Queen of Spades was in no mood for bartering that evening.

As she watched them walk away, she sighed with relief, closed the heavy curtains, and made arrangements to meet her latest beau so she could go on a fancy-type date somewhere and take her mind off the hideous time she had been having lately. He arrived at 11:00, looking as dapper as ever, greeting her with "Hello, Angel," and handing her a yellow tulip he'd obviously pinched from someone's garden on the way over.

That night she arrived home drunk and was laughing so hard she was in stitches as she pushed the door shut and locked him out. She threw herself onto the unmade bed and fell deeply asleep fully dressed. She was awakened by the sound of someone ominously calling her name. Slowly she opened her eyes and the sight she beheld stopped her heart. There stood the ghost of Constance Byrne, blood glistening from the fresh gash on her head and running down her neck, matching the glisten from the stolen jewelry she now seemingly repossessed.

She looked at the terrified Queen of Spades and pointed accusingly in her direction, a stolen ring sparkling on the threateningly thrust finger. "You stole not only my inheritance but also my second chance at life. I despise you, you wicked wretch." And with this, she came suddenly toward the Queen of Spades. Seeing this, she spoke some magic words she knew to protect herself from ghosts and the spirit instantly disappeared, the rings and brooches falling to the floor with a clatter.

The Queen of Spades looked at them lying still on the floor for a moment, but then the doorbell rang. She arose and stepped carefully around the jewels

as she made her way to the thick velvet curtain to cautiously peek out. The three big men in black suits she had hocked the jewelry to earlier now pounded on her door with increased force. She immediately slipped on her coat, leaving the jewelry where it was, hoping they would see it when they broke in and spare the rest of her home. Then she slipped out the back door.

When she returned the next evening, she found she had no such luck, her home had been devastated. She lay on the floor with her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

After locking her doors, she began to clean up her house and fell asleep exhausted. When she woke up, she was choking. The ghost of Constance was straddling her and pushing the jewelry down her throat. She tried to push her off but her hands went through the ghost feeling nothing more than coldness. Blackness started forming around the circle of her vision, slowly leaching out everything but the grimacing smile of the ghost, and even this, too, slowly faded from view as she ceased her struggle and fell downward, ever down.

She awoke and couldn't move her arms. The wooden lid of her coffin was mere inches from her face, and as her mind cleared the Queen of Spades realized ironically that she had been buried alive. A couple strolling near the cemetery heard her screams but dismissed them as the wind and continued on, never pausing to glance back. Meanwhile in a nearby grave the eyes of Constance shut forever, finally at rest.

## ***THE GAMBLER'S LESSON***

Gambling is the king of all vices. No one knows the truth of this more than Felix Worthy. The alluring grip of gambling held him fast and drained him dry like a succubus. Nineteen years ago his beautiful, beloved wife had died in childbirth, leaving him with his kind and lovely daughter, Ezmerelda, and the scant shack in which they lived. He lost everything else he owned to his all-consuming vice. He often felt he had been born under an unlucky star, the black beams of this star wafting down to encircle him like an asp.

Every night Felix went to the local saloon to gamble and drink. He left in the afternoon and did not return until very late in the evening or sometimes not at all.

One night Felix went to the saloon and sat down at the dice table. Across from him sat a very thin man with slightly pointed ears. He was dressed all in red crushed velvet with black edging. Rakish black hair with a widow's peak lay upon his head. His sharp blue eyes shone brightly against his pale skin. These eyes made Felix nervous, for it seemed they could look into his mind.



They began to play. The stranger was cold and distant and arrogant. He easily won every game but never displayed the slightest satisfaction. Finally, Felix gambled away the very last of his money, his possessions, and even the

ramshackle hellhole he called a home. As he was about to rise and leave the table, the stranger stared directly into his eyes.

The gaze of the stranger mesmerized Felix. He thought of his loving and loyal daughter at home, and he was filled with a desperate desire to win back what he had lost at all costs.

“What sort of creature are you?” asked the sad and beaten father. “I have never seen the likes of you in my life, and I fear I’ve lost my home and property to the devil.”

“I am not the devil, and I don’t intend any evil,” claimed the stranger. “I am the Duke of the Elves, and I own riches beyond comprehension. I put this purse to wager; in it are many rare and precious jewels and gold. It is magic and will refill three times. I will wager this and all that you previously lost this evening if you roll the dice again.”

“But I cannot!” exclaimed Felix in despair. “I have absolutely nothing left.”

“There you are wrong,” said the Duke. “In your home you still have a pearl beyond price. Gamble your daughter; and if you win, you shall keep her and all that I have laid before you. If you lose, I will take her.”

“Give me a moment to decide!” cried Felix.

“Your moment is up,” said the Duke coldly.

“I will wager Ezmerelda. Heaven help me!” said Felix at last.

Felix and the Duke each threw the dice and the Duke won. Felix pressed his palms to his eyes and burst into tears. When at last he lifted his head, all the riches had disappeared from the table. He looked for the Duke but saw nothing more than a red vapor disappearing up the chimney.

When Felix returned to the shack that evening, Ezmerelda was gone: only her little black-buckled shoes remained.



While her father was out, she sat at the table doing piecework for a local seamstress and worrying about her father when a group of strangers came to the door, whispering indecipherable things. They wore dark cloaks and she

could not tell whether they were men or women. They threw a cask over her and then carried her swiftly away. Ezmerelda was overwhelmed with fright.

While the evil elves carried her inside the pitch dark cask, she peered through a small hole to see that she was traveling faster than she'd ever gone before. Straight ahead was a wall of granite, and just as she thought she would be smashed to pieces, the rock magically split open and a doorway appeared. She was hurtled down into the earth. She heard rocks and roots scraping against the cask but could not see anything.



Suddenly the cask opened and she fell sprawling to the floor in the midst of laughter. Strange people clothed in fine silk and velvet surrounded her. They were extraordinarily pale and thin, and their ears were pointed. Before her stood a man in red velvet.

He handed her a brooch in which lay a golden rose made from her great-grandmother's blond hair. She remembered this brooch from her childhood; she had been told it had belonged to her dead mother. She clutched it desperately, asking, "Where did you get this?"



“I won it from your father,” he responded. You may keep this pathetic trinket, because I know it has sentimental value to you. This will be the one souvenir of your former life. Your father gambled you away, and now you shall be my scullery maid. Mrs. Bent will show you to the servants’ quarters. Mrs. Bent! Come straightaway!”

Mrs. Bent was a plump, flustered old woman in a maid’s uniform. Ezmerelda recognized her as being human. Under the cold gaze of the Duke, Mrs. Bent grabbed Ezmerelda by the forearm and dragged her up a decrepit wooden spiral staircase to the servants’ quarters.

It was here that she received a scullery maid’s uniform and a corset made from lead. She was not given shoes. Mrs. Bent explained Ezmerelda’s duties: emptying the Duke’s chamber pot, mending his clothes, and scrubbing the stone steps leading to his lavish home.



Time passed but Ezmerelda did not give up hope of escape. She knew every nook and cranny of the Duke's home at this point--as well as his habits

and some of his financial affairs--although he tried to keep it all a secret from her. She listened at the keyhole and sifted through his belongings.

One evening as she cleaned the hallway outside the Duke's locked door, she heard an ethereal tinkling sound inside the Duke's room. She knelt and peered through the keyhole. She saw the Duke sitting in an easy chair with his back to her. Before him was a luminous lady with the brilliant wings of a moth. She wore golden shoes encrusted in garnets.

"The shoes are serving you well, I see," said the Duke to the lady.

"Yes, my precious. Thank you so much for giving them to me," she responded. "I've discovered that not only do they carry me through time and space, but they also carry back anything I touch, so now I can bring you back many presents in return." She laughed and sat on the Duke's lap, petting his hair and kissing him.

"Nothing is too good for you, my sweet," said the Duke. Ezmerelda scurried down the hallway into the shadows.

The next day, while the Duke was away, she found the golden shoes under his bed. "The luminous lady must have forgotten them," she thought. She pulled them out hurriedly and slipped them on. They fit perfectly. "The glory of having shoes once more!" she cried. "Oh, how I wish I could always wear these shoes." She heard footsteps in the hallway and knew the Duke was returning. Frantically, she tried to pry the shoes off, but they were stuck fast. "I wish these shoes would come off!" she said in exasperation. They slid easily from her feet. She realized that the shoes were not only beautiful but also granted wishes. If she had them, she could escape from the Kingdom of the Elves. She heard the Duke's key turning in the lock; in a panic, she looked for a place to hide the shoes. Just as the door opened, she thrust them under the floorboards.

Many times she hoped to sneak into the Duke's room and retrieve the shoes from their hiding place, but every time she went to his room, she found him there engaged in correspondence.

Later, when the Duke asked her for them, she denied seeing them, knowing they were under the floorboards all along. He reprimanded her as he

struck her, saying that the fairy princess to whom they belonged would be very upset that her shoes were gone.

Hearing this, Ezmerelda denied it even more vehemently, and the Duke struck her with more force until eventually he tired of the sport. He left her with one final warning: "If I ever find you with those shoes in your possession, I will kill you in a merciless manner." With this, he rushed away to his secret meeting, leaving her in a heap on the floor, blood weeping from her wounds. There she lay, waiting for the elves to retrieve her and thrust her into that wretched cask again.

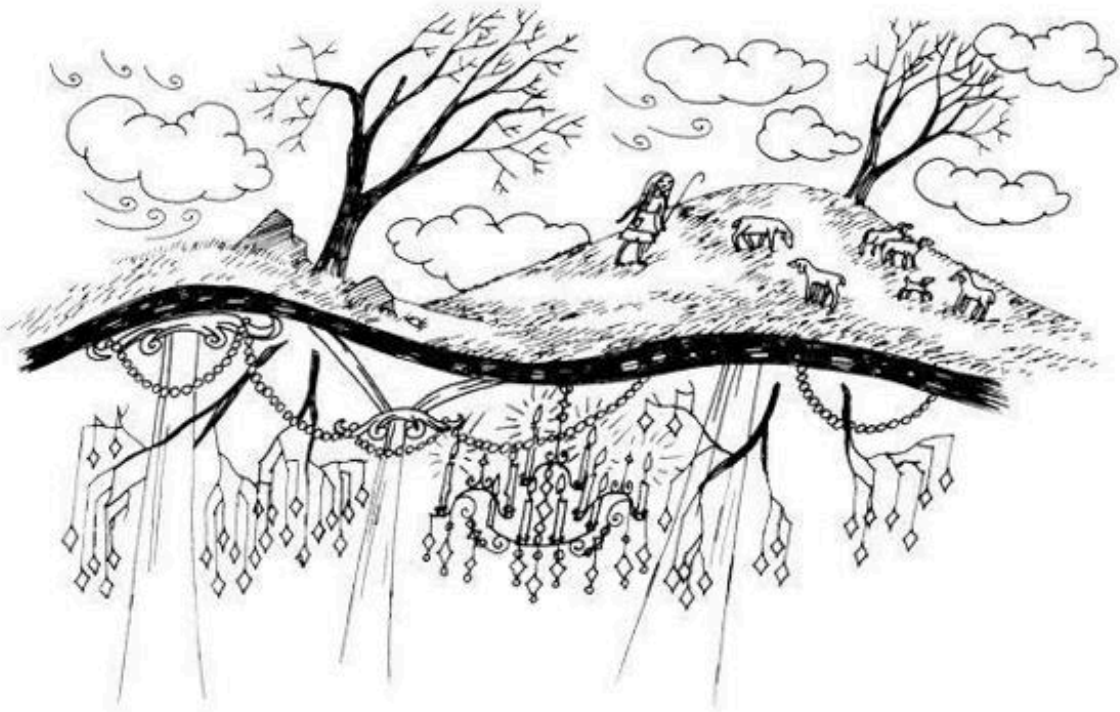
The elves held secret meetings annually, from which Ezmerelda and the other slaves were unanimously excluded. During these times she was thrown into the cask and taken to a hollow tree, where she would remain without food and water until they remembered to retrieve her. Sometimes these stints would last for days, and she cried and twisted inside the trunk, praying for the angel of death to come free her from her misery.



Once, a long time ago, when they took her from the tree, she peered through a hole in the cask and saw them move toward a large rock in the woods near the hollow tree where they kept her. She saw a hand touch the rock

with a hematite key, and where the key touched the stone, a keyhole appeared. The key turned in the lock and a door appeared. They then took her back into the elf kingdom underground. The roof of the elf kingdom was domed and held up with shining ivory pillars. The domes, she realized, were the undersides of the hills on the other side of the earth where humans and animals tread.

She thought about this now as she waited in the tree, sicker than ever from her severe beating. If only she had the key, she could escape from the elf kingdom, for now she knew the way and the means of escape. She also prayed that someone might hear her in the tree, a woodsman perhaps, wandering through the forest, and chop her from the tree with his swift, sharp axe. But to no avail: the elves had hidden her so deeply in the forest; no one ever dared go so far, because the brush and bramble were so wild and thick.



Ezmerelda heard noises outside the tree: the elves had returned to take her back to the kingdom. Once there she was allotted minimal recovery time before she was forced to return to her usual drudgery. It was during this time as she ate her gruel that she remembered the hematite key as being one of the keys she saw previously on the Duke's set of keys. At the first opportunity, she

stole this key off the ring and kept it on a string around her neck, hidden under her clothes.

The next time the elves had a meeting and took her to the tree, she completely lost all vestiges of sanity. As the elves locked Ezmerelda in the tree, she began to hallucinate. She thought swarms of insects had infested the tree and ceaselessly crawled on her and stung her. She began to howl like a banshee. Her screams stopped abruptly when she heard a reply. A man's voice called from somewhere near her feet. "Who is making that racket? Are you a spirit haunting this mine?"

She looked for the source of the voice and saw a small tunnel at her feet. It was a hollow tree root. She called through the tunnel, "No, sir, I am unfortunately very much alive. The evil elves have imprisoned me inside this hollow tree! Please come let me out!"

Silence was her only reply. Ezmerelda thought that perhaps, like the insects, the man was a hallucination as well. But she heard the voice again: "I see you are speaking through this root," it called back to her. "I unearthed it this morning while digging for diamonds. I am a miner. I will help you if I can. Where is this hollow tree?"

"I don't know," she called back through the root. "They always put me in a cask." Then she became more frantic. "I hear them coming now! Please help me!"

"Before you go," said the man in desperation, "what is your name? I am Lucian."

"Ezmerelda," she answered. "Here they are! I must go!" Then the poor miner heard only silence.

Lucian stood in the diamond mine holding his pickax in a daze. He was determined to save the lady whom he heard calling through the hollow root. Every night he dreamed of Ezmerelda. He saw her as a young woman in tatters, her beautiful eyes shadowed in grief, her long tresses falling like a dark waterfall down her back in glossy waves. Every day he went to the spot in the mine where he saw the hollow root and called for her--to no avail. He feared she had been injured or killed, and he would never hear from her again.



Deeper and deeper he and the other miners dug into the mine in their search for diamonds. Once his pickaxe struck through a soft rock and made a hole through which light shone. He peered in and saw a kingdom that was inhabited by strange beings he knew must be the elves of which Ezmerelda had spoken. Perhaps this was the place she was imprisoned. As he watched, he saw several mortal servant girls, bound by the wrists in chains. They were clothed in exquisite maid uniforms, but their feet were bare. He stared endlessly but could see none of their faces. He couldn't bear it. He felt insane. He covered the hole and turned back to his work, vowing to leave all these surreal experiences behind.

Finally, one day after he had finished his work and was making his way out of the mine, he heard a lady crying. He ran to the spot where he had discovered the root and called to her.

"Lucian!" she answered. "I'm so elated to hear your voice. Please save me! I am desperate!"

"Dear Ezmerelda, can you whistle?" he asked her.

"Yes, I can," she responded eagerly.



“Then repeat this signal: two long whistles, then a brief one. Do this loudly and I will know in which tree you are imprisoned.” He took an axe and went up from the mine into the woods. He moved carefully through the thick tangle of branches and fallen leaves, listening intently.

Soon he heard the whistle, faint at first, but growing ever louder until he stood before a giant dead oak. The black branches clawed at the only small patch of gray sky that he could see. “Ezmerelda!” he called.



“Lucian! I am here. Act quickly; there is no telling when they will return!”

Lucian held the ax high and said, "Crouch low and I will cut it just above you."

At this he struck the tree with the ax, and a great stream of blood ran from where he hit. It bathed the earth in crimson, for it was an enchanted tree. He chopped it again and again, rivers of blood flowing from the tree and running over his boots, soaking into the ground. He heard Ezmerelda laughing inside, and with one last strong blow, the tree fell and she was revealed. Upon seeing her, Lucian thought she was more beautiful than he had ever imagined in his dreams, despite the fact she was covered in blood.

He gave her his hand, and she stepped lithely from the tree. They ran toward his home, but just as they reached the edge of the forest, they heard a crowd of voices from inside the wood, screaming, "This is why it rained blood in the elf kingdom today! She must pay, severely pay!"

This urged the miner and the maid to move even more swiftly than before. Eventually, they got to his house, where, after locking the doors and windows securely, they bathed and slept in each other's arms.

Ezmerelda awoke from her deep sleep to find herself alone in the meager cottage. At first she couldn't remember where she was, but she gradually got her bearings and recalled the kind miner who saved her from the elves. That day she did not leave the house for fear they would see her and take her again. Instead, she busied herself by cleaning the cottage and tending the fire, anxiously waiting for the miner to return. That evening he returned with a ring.





When he asked her to marry him, she readily accepted. The small wedding was held the following week.

Ezmerelda was much happier than she had ever been. She loved her husband and her new home, though at night she still had grandiose nightmares of the elf kingdom and awakened in her humble home, thinking heavily of the treasures there. She tossed and turned in her bed, holding the hematite key that still hung from a string around her neck.

She devised a plan one evening and presented it to her husband. She knew where the door to the elf kingdom was; she showed him the key to unlock it. If they could get in without being seen, she could retrieve her golden wish shoes, and they could have anything they wanted forever.

But it was a great risk. If the elves saw them, they would definitely kill them. Lucian thought about it. He thought about the mines, looked around the broken-down shack he could barely afford, and decided to take the risk.

Ezmerelda knew when the elves would have their annual meeting, during which time all the halls were practically empty except for servants.



It was at this time that they decided to break in. The next meeting would occur in two days. After waiting anxiously, they went to the stone in the woods that served as the entrance to the elf kingdom.

Reaching for the hematite key around her neck, stolen from the Duke so long ago, Ezmerelda touched it to the stone. The keyhole appeared and she turned the lock. The door was revealed, and golden light from a hundred candles shone from inside the stone and illuminated the dark woods around them.

Cautiously, they entered the temporary doorway and ran down the hallway toward the Duke's chamber, where Ezmerelda had once been enslaved. As they reached the room, she heard a clamor in the hall. "Did you see her too? It was the Duke's scullery maid that escaped. Perhaps she has come back to steal from us!" Footsteps echoed in the hall, coming nearer to the room.

"There!" she cried to Lucian in a loud whisper and jumped on the floorboard under which her shoes were hidden. "Help me pry up this board."

Lucian wrenched the board loose, and Ezmerelda thrust the shoes upon her feet just as the evil elves appeared in the doorway. She grabbed Lucian's hand and exclaimed, "I wish to disappear to an island on the other side of the world!" The elves leapt upon her and grabbed her other hand only to find themselves standing in the empty place where she and Lucian had just been, holding nothing but her ring.

When Ezmerelda and Lucian reappeared, they found themselves surrounded by crystalline, pale blue waterfalls, fruit-bearing trees, and flowers of all kinds. The warm ocean lapped the white sand and wove a tapestry of mist along the coastline. She noticed that her wedding ring was missing and immediately wished for another. A ring finer than any she could imagine appeared. Then she wished for nine more, one for every finger. They all appeared, each becoming more lavish than the last. Ezmerelda then wished for a grand and beautiful home.





Lucian was ecstatic. He never again had to work in the drudgery of the mine. As they watched the sun slowly sink beneath the waves, Ezmerelda thought of only one more wish that would make their lives perfect. She wished

for her father. In an instant the old man appeared before them, crippled and half blind. He stared at his surroundings in confusion. "Have I finally died and gone to Eden?" asked Felix Worthy. "I'm very surprised if I have, because I assuredly thought I was headed the other way. I see the ethereal vision of my good daughter Ezmerelda, so heaven is where I must be."

"No, father. You are alive!" cried Ezmerelda happily through her tears. "All of our strife has finally ended. I suffered inhuman tortures at the expense of your vice. I see that you also have gone through pain. I forgive you, because I know it was hard for you as well, and you are the only father I have. You will be forever content and safe now, as will we all."

At this, she ran to him and held him. That day was the finest of many fine days to come. From that day forward, no cloud of misery ever obscured the sunlight that shone upon the lives of Ezmerelda, her father, and her husband. From this, they learned the depth of loss and gain in grandeur one could endure by indulging in gambling.

## ***THE SALT MAIDEN***

Let's turn back the clock to a time when clocks didn't exist. The earth was an orb as it is today, but it had no water, and the creatures that now live in the ocean were clearly visible squirming around in the mud, flapping their long slimy tentacles pointlessly and in vain. High above all this mess shone the beautiful face of The Moon. As she danced in her orbit, she looked down with interest which turned to disgust and then pity at the pathetic loathsome beasts below. The Moon is made of moon dust and rock, but originally she was an egg made from smooth white salt that had not quite solidified. As she rotated, thin strands of moonlight wafted down upon the earth and entangled it like spider webs.

Months passed and eventually the egg began to crack. It took time eternal as we perceive it, but to her it was but a few moments. From the crack slowly emerged a beautiful baby made entirely of salt. Her skin was white, smooth, and luminous and her hair lay flat and still against her head, for there was no breeze on the moon. In contrast, her eyes were deep, dark and black as the endless surrounding universe. Tiny glints of star light reflected in her eyes as her salt heart beat.



The Moon adored her daughter and showered her with intricate diaphanous dresses made from thin sheets of pressed salt. She did this by gestating them inside her hollow shell then pushing them up through the

surface where they grew like white upside down oversized flowers until plucked by The Salt Maiden.

As The Salt Maiden grew, she grew more lovely and more bored. To break the tedium, she would peer down upon the Earth through her telescope, searching the landscape below and watching the creatures and the wildlife. As the wind blew, it formed deep yellow waves. The Salt Maiden longed to run through the grass. Her heart yearned to pick the fruit ripening in the twilight.

One stultifying afternoon, she peered at the creatures in the mud pits. Her circle of vision ran up from the creatures in the mud to the land mass sporting an army of flora and fauna. Then she saw him. The Salt Maiden couldn't believe her eyes. Seeing him increased her loneliness two thousand times. As she watched him moving through the underbrush, gazing up at the sky thoughtfully, his eyes seemed to meet the gaze of hers through the telescope and her salt heart broke. She longed to hold him and run her fingers through his dark brown hair. If only she could kiss his beautiful white neck and taste his little perfect teeth. She informed her mother that she would be leaving soon and began building a salt ladder so she could climb down to the center of the earth and be in the arms of the one she desired. As she built the ladder, she checked on the young man below, to see if he was intuitively preparing for her descent.

One day he stood by the giant mud pit digging up clams with his toes. Another time he made a pile of everything flammable he could find and caused a gigantic fire she could almost see without the telescope. Finally, the day came that The Salt Maiden would make her escape. She bid her mother farewell and started down the ladder towards the earth. Her mother was very sad indeed, but kept a stoic face as she watched her only daughter descend. The Salt Maiden began to sing:

*Loneliness I leave behind me  
As well as my loving mother  
Will my life be good? I ponder  
For I have known no other.*

*Will his arms be strong and stable?  
Will the Earth be kind to me?  
Is this all a mere: delusion?*

*The future is unclear to see.*

She repeated the song as she twisted further into delirium until she reached the earth's atmosphere. It was too much for her. Without lungs, she couldn't breathe and began to suffocate. She tried to call to her mother for help but The Moon was too far up the ladder. Being too weak to climb back up, The Salt Maiden collapsed on the rungs where she eventually died. The Moon, upon seeing this, began to cry. She wept endlessly and bitterly in a seemingly never-ending torrent that washed over The Salt Maiden and the salt ladder.

The Moon's tears eventually reached Earth and rivers and streams began to form. Water rushed over the ladder and The Salt Maiden, dissolving them in the Moon's tears which now filled every mud pit. The creatures began to gleefully swim and splash in their newfound habitat. The young man looked towards the heavens in surprise, as the ocean filled up before his eyes. As he saw the white moon reflected on the ocean's surface, he was moved to tears for reasons unknown and realized his tears were as salty as the newly formed sea.

## ***THE TUMULTUOUS LIFE OF RAPUNZEL'S PARENTS***

Conception. Consumption. Conviction.

Rapunzel's father was a carpenter and her mother did everything else but carpentry. They lived on a small hill surrounded by lilacs in spring and snow in winter. Their home was modest but beautiful, built by the capable and talented hands of her father and decorated by the silken hands of her mother. Sometimes they would open the shutters and peer out of the window, careful to hide themselves behind the lace curtains as they watched their neighbor working in her garden full of lettuce.

Their neighbor would always wear a deep green dress with a pattern of sparkling lettuce printed on it, gardening gloves, and a green wide brimmed hat with a veil to block out all traces of sunlight. She wore this apparel because the pattern of the lettuce on her dress would lure the growing plants to life. She couldn't make it come up any other way...she was a witch!

The couple would watch her and make little jokes about her crazy antics and the way she decorated her yard and home. Even though they had animosity towards the witch, their jokes never went so far as to say an evil thing about her. Whenever they tried, they bit their tongue, sometimes so hard it bled. Hanging on a silver nail in the witch's house were scissors, put there to prevent evil things to be said about her behind her back. The scissors are a hex to clip the tongues of any malevolent neighbors. Rapunzel's parents laughed and talked about how amazingly old the witch must have been.

One evening while visiting their friends across town, the couple drank five bottles of homemade wine and decided to run through the mud as they hit each other with cattails growing by the side of the creek. They remember frolicking this way the night Rapunzel was conceived.



Soon, the carpenter's wife began to feel very sick and all she could think about was the witch's lettuce. Rapunzel's father tried to get her mother to eat but she wouldn't. She would break down sobbing, then vomit, and plead for the witch's lettuce.

At night she would stay awake with her fists clenched and all her muscles strung like a wire. She stared at the ceiling as she tossed, trying to find a comfortable position. Keeping her husband awake, she constantly pleaded for him to get her the witch's lettuce.

After work one day, he entered his newly dark life of a messy house as his crazy pregnant wife stared listlessly out the window at the lettuce. Her once nubile body was now thin and gaunt save for her bloated abdomen. Her once shiny, long golden ringlets were now a mess of faded corn silk.

Her eyes which were once bright blue had turned lightless. It was too much for him to take. He disliked being reduced to stealing the witch's lettuce but he decided that night to sneak into the garden for his ailing bride. The witch's property was surrounded by a ninety foot tall wrought iron fence . Silver cupids danced their frozen minuet in exact patterns throughout the intricate swirls and iron leaves.



Every so often a jewel would gleam at him from the pattern entwined in iron. The crescent moon looked like a discarded fingernail but was his only light source. The shadows the fence cast were long, black, ominous, and seemed to be ever-changing. Crickets chirped in the bushes all around him. Breezes tossed his hair ever so slightly and horses snorted sleepily in the pasture nearby. Behind the witch's fence, everything was still and silent, seeming waiting with baited breath for his intrusion.



The carpenter took his shovel and dug under the fence, praying all the while. The soil on the witch's side of the fence was rich and black and made his internal organs feel like they were being smothered by a warm wet quilt.

Despite this, he was able to run to the lettuce patch and throw as many as he could fit into the pillowcases he had brought. He then scurried under the fence like a rat and threw the dirt back into the hole he created. The witch's soil he dug earlier was now dirt. Only the witch's garden contained rich soil; he and everyone else had to make do with dirt.

When he arrived at home at three o'clock in the morning, his heart was practically beating out of his chest. He did not wake up his wife as she hadn't slept in days. The next morning she was overjoyed to find the lettuce. She and her husband made a salad out of all the lettuce and ate it all in one sitting.

What a pleasant day! Afterward she did the dishes all the while humming songs about bluebells and swallows. Her eyes had started to regain their luster and they even got out the dulcimer and zither to play a couple of tunes in front of the crackling fire. The carpenter had abandoned his morals in exchange for mere lettuce and newfound hope.

Alas, the merriment did not last for long. The next morning his wife's craving had increased a thousand fold. She tried to do herself in with a pair of shears. Her husband reluctantly agreed to grant her request for more lettuce. He had no choice. Returning to the witch's garden, he discovered stealing was easier this time. As he dug under the fence he didn't pray. As he threw the seventh head of lettuce into a pillowcase, he saw the form of the witch out of the corner of his eye.

She was back-lit by the light of a big sliver moon - larger than the night before. Perhaps this is why the witch caught him this time. Her form cast a long, black shadow running through the garden to his thieving hands. The witch spoke and when she did, her voice could have been that of a man or woman old or young, it was indecipherable but definitely sounded like thick, green velvet.

She spoke calmly and told the carpenter she was furious. The witch went on to say that she found his petty, ignorant wife to be a dolt and a breed cow and told him the childless life he was about to live was no different from the old, so he should stop wailing like that.

## ***RED***

On a cold winter day, a beautiful young maiden of twelve ran around the kitchen shrieking. This gave her mother a migraine which made it difficult for her to cook. Thinking of ways to get rid of her hyperactive daughter, she said, "Red, go give your grandmother this basket of goodies." In the basket were a bottle of whiskey and a slice of pink cake with "THD" written on top in chocolate frosting. She put the things in a basket and covered it with a crimson cloth. Red's mother was always fearful of a hunter accidentally shooting her little Red so she made her a bright red hand knitted cloak. She made the cloak red for safety because Red traveled through the woods frequently to visit her Grandmother.

Looking up into the trees, she imagined nearby birds saw her as a small blood spot against the virgin snow. She had been down this path many times and was not afraid of getting lost. Suddenly, there was a howl behind her in the distance which made her walk faster. Though she wasn't afraid of hunters, she was afraid of wolves. As it grew darker, she heard an even louder howl. The wolves were getting closer. The sun rapidly descended, causing her to grow cold. To warm herself, Red drank a little of the whiskey and replaced it with snow, so her Grandmother wouldn't notice.



When she looked towards the sky again, it had turned blood red and looming in the path ahead was the largest wolf she had ever seen. Sizing her

up, panting it spoke. "Hello baby." She was so shocked to hear a wolf speak that her heart skipped a beat. Could it just be the whiskey talking?

In order to sound brave she said, "Get out of my way, you big galoot! I need to get to my Grandma's and I have no time for a scourge like you!"

"Is Granny a feeble one?" the wolf responded. His voice sounded like it was wrapped in meat and drug through the din.

"Yes she is now leave me be!" Red shouted.

"O.K. O.K. girlie, simmer down," replied the Wolf. "Just help me with one thing. I know where your Grandmother's house is, and I'm trying to get to a place nearby, so just tell me where she lives."

Red knew from her scout manual to be helpful to people in need so she told the Wolf, "It's on Morning Glory Circle." The Wolf then left swiftly, stopping ten feet away to wave goodbye before completely disappearing through the trees. As she walked alone down the dark path, she thought about how glad she was that the smelly Wolf finally left.

She eagerly ran down the path towards her Grandmother's house as this had been a very creepy evening. When Red got to her Grandmother's house, she discovered her Grandmother left the door ajar. As she entered, a pungent smell of meat lingered in the air.

"Sit down," her Grandmother said in a rough voice, "and have some roast sweetie."

"Grandma, do you have a cold?" asked Red.

"Sure do Hon...I reckon I shouldn't have been up so late last night," replied Grandma.

Red began ravenously eating mouthfuls of meat and bit down on something so hard it cracked her molar. She fished it out of her mouth to look at it. It was Grandma's wedding ring. She turned to look at Grandma lying in the bed and said, "Grandma, your wedding ring slipped off in the roast." Then she stopped short. "Grandma, maybe it's just the light but you look funny."

“Never you mind Hon, take of your clothes and get into bed with me,” ordered Grandma. Red riding hood took of her shoes and they fell to the floor with a clunk.

Then Red noticed something else strange. “Grandma, what big ears you have!” said Red.

“I just got cosmetic surgery, dear, they’ll look fine in a couple of weeks,” replied Grandma.

“”Grandma, what a hairy face you have,” said Red, as she took off her dress.

“It’s just a small side effect from the pills I’ve been taking since menopause,” replied Grandma.

“Grandma what a big mouth you have,” said Red, as she pulled down her stockings to reveal her supple, white young thighs.

“The better to eat you with, ha ha!” replied Grandma, who in fact was the Wolf. He pounced on Red with his large body victimizing her instantly, leaving her for dead on the floor in a new kind of red cloak.

*The End*

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